



CITY COUNCIL AGENDA REPORT

MEETING DATE: January 5, 2004

ITEM NUMBER: Item Number

SUBJECT: CONVERSION TO BLACK AND WHITE POLICE PATROL VEHICLES

DATE: DECEMBER 3, 2003

FROM: POLICE OPERATIONS SERVICES DIVISION

PRESENTATION BY: JOHN D. HENSLEY, CHIEF OF POLICE

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: LIEUTENANT KARL SCHULER (714) 754-5384

RECOMMENDATION:

Approve staff's recommendation to return the color scheme of the police patrol fleet from the existing all white color back to the traditional black and white scheme.

BACKGROUND:

The use of contrasting color police vehicles dates back to the 1920's when virtually all vehicles were black. The use of a contrasting white color for the doors of the vehicle provided greater visibility to the motoring public. Initially, this contrasting color scheme was exclusive to police vehicles and was easily recognizable as a vehicle of authority. Over time, the use of the contrasting black and white color scheme became the norm for many law enforcement vehicles.

When the City incorporated in 1953, the Police Department began using the traditional black and white color scheme for the police patrol fleet. This practice continued until the early 1970's at which time the Department transitioned to an all white color scheme for the fleet.

The two principle factors that influenced this color change were; cost reduction and officer comfort. Although the additional cost was minimal, single colored vehicles were less expensive to purchase than two-toned vehicles. In addition, the police patrol vehicles of the early '70's were not equipped with air conditioning. The prevailing opinion was that an all white vehicle retained less interior heat, and therefore would be more comfortable without the added expense of air conditioning.

A secondary factor may have been a belief by some that an all white police patrol vehicle portrayed a "softer" image to the public. During the late 60's and early '70's, societal changes and issues related to symbols of authority influenced the public's perception of law enforcement. Police agencies sought various means to change the public's perception of the profession and the transition to an all white police vehicle was an example of such a change.

Although all police vehicles are now equipped with air conditioning as standard equipment, and the additional cost of two toned vehicles is minimal, the Police Department has

continued to utilize the all white color scheme since the original transition in the early 1970's.

ANALYSIS:

The Police Department is committed to fully implementing the Community Oriented Policing and Problem Solving (COPPS) philosophy throughout the community. By resolution, the City Council has adopted the COPPS philosophy as the guiding principle by which the Police Department will address issues and meet the needs of the public.

The successful implementation of the COPPS philosophy relies heavily upon the community to serve as active participants in a collaborative effort with the various City Departments and other stakeholders to identify and resolve problems. This collaborate effort may only be achieved through open dialogue and ready access to the various stakeholders; especially the police officer assigned to a patrol beat.

By the very nature of police patrol, the beat officer is the primary conduit by which two-way communication with the community is achieved. They are the primary source of information to the localized area they serve, and through their personal contact, the beat officer is the principle force behind effective COPPS implementation. The importance of community recognition of the beat officer cannot be over emphasized. This recognition is dependent upon increased visibility and the public's perception that the beat officer is approachable. These three elements are necessary to ensure that the COPPS philosophy and implementation will occur.

Increased Visibility, Recognition, Approachability and Officer Morale

The private vehicles on the road today run the gamut with respect to colors, however, a significant number are white or light colored. While most would agree that the contrast offered by a black and white vehicle makes it more visible upon the road with other white or light colored cars, staff was unable to locate any published empirical data relating to visibility studies on this subject.

Staff conducted a survey of the other Orange County law enforcement agencies to determine the number of local agencies that utilize the black and white paint scheme and their rationale for selecting that scheme. (Attachment "1") In summary, eighteen (18) of the twenty-one (21) agencies surveyed, or nearly 86%, currently utilized black and white police patrol vehicles. Eleven (11) of these formerly used an all white, or other colored vehicle, and subsequently converted the fleet to black and white. The remaining seven (7) agencies have always maintained a black and white police fleet.

Of the local agencies that utilize black and white vehicles, 83% reported that the reason for using such a scheme was due to the increased visibility and greater police recognition by the community. Several reporting agencies believed that due to the increased visibility factor, they achieved the appearance of an increased police presence without an increase in the number of vehicles deployed. The contrasting color scheme also aids the police helicopter pilots in easily recognizing patrol units on the ground.

The second most offered reason for using the black and white paint scheme was the "traditional" appearance that it offers. This "tradition" can enhance the sense of comfort and approachability the community associates with its beat patrol officer. It is the

opinion of staff that returning to a more traditional appearance of the police vehicle will improve the recognition of the beat officer and encourage more interaction between the community and the officer.

As a part of the analysis conducted by staff, Captain Tim Johnson of the Sunnyvale Police Department was contacted due to his research on the subject. He confirmed that his studies of other law enforcement agencies found that black and white police vehicles are more recognizable by the public. He also indicated that his studies revealed the public responded positively to the familiar look of black and white police vehicles and found it made the officers appear more approachable.

The traditional look offered by the black and white paint scheme can also have a positive influence upon the morale of the beat officers serving their community. Research determined that a significant number of the law enforcement agencies across the nation, that have returned to the black and white paint scheme, cited officer preference as one of the influencing factors. Many of the Costa Mesa police officers have indicated a similar interest in converting the patrol fleet to black and white. It is staff's opinion that while the officers of the Police Department currently exhibit an excellent attitude and desire toward their service to the community, the change in color scheme would further enhance their morale and positively impact their working conditions.

Conversion Costs and Funding Mechanism

The Police Department maintains a fleet of forty-five (45) police patrol vehicles. The proposed black and white paint scheme would consist of an all black car with the exception of the doors and roof, which would remain white. The cost to repaint all existing patrol units is \$300 per vehicle. Additionally, each vehicle would receive new decals at a cost of approximately \$25 per vehicle. The net cost for converting the existing patrol fleet to the black and white scheme is approximately \$14,625. It would take approximately seven (7) weeks to repaint the existing patrol fleet.

There was no appropriation in the 2003-04 FY Budget for the proposed expenditure. Staff identified a source within the Department's existing budget to fund the proposal and the reallocation of funds would not have an adverse affect on service levels.

The Department recently discontinued use of the existing in-car video system in the patrol units due to ongoing maintenance problems and poor audio reception. The 2003-04 FY Department budget appropriated \$18,500 for annual maintenance costs for the system. To date, only \$1000 has been expended from this account, leaving a balance of \$17,500 available to fund the proposed paint scheme conversion.

If the City Council approves the black and white conversion recommendation, staff proposes that as the existing fleet requires replacement, new vehicles would be ordered in the black and white paint scheme directly from the dealer. The current cost per vehicle of a new Crown Victoria in factory painted black and white is \$450. While there is significant fluctuation in the number of patrol vehicles replaced annually, on average, approximately six to seven vehicles are replaced per year. For example, in 2003-04 FY, seven (7) vehicles were replaced. In 2004-05, only two (2) are scheduled, while 2005-06 FY, ten (10) vehicles are projected to be replaced. Based upon this average, the additional cost to maintain a black and white patrol fleet, after the initial investment, would amount to approximately \$3000 annually.

A secondary benefit that would result from repainting the existing fleet is a better-maintained appearance of the police vehicles. The condition of the police patrol vehicle is a significant factor that contributes to the “first impression” members of the community have of their Police Department, their beat officer, and the officer’s approachability and professionalism.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

One alternative considered to increase beat officer visibility was an increase in the number of officers assigned to field patrol duties. Either adding new police officer positions to the Police Department or reassigning existing staff could possibly accomplish this alternative.

The addition of new police officer positions to the Police Department would result in substantial salary, benefit and equipment cost increases and is not recommended at this time. Staff also routinely reviews personnel allocation within the various assignments and makes adjustments as necessary. At present, staff is unable to recommend any personnel reallocation to beat responsibilities that would significantly increase police visibility without negatively affecting other service areas.

FISCAL REVIEW:

The cost to repaint the police patrol vehicles will be covered by the Police Department’s FY 03-04 budget, under Crime Investigation program, that had been originally intended for the maintenance of the in-car video system.

LEGAL REVIEW:

No legal review is required.

CONCLUSION:

As a part of the Department’s commitment to COPPS implementation, staff considered various alternatives to achieve the goal of increased visibility, recognition and approachability of the beat patrol officers by the community. This goal is the natural and next step in the evolution of Community Oriented Policing and Problem Solving in the City of Costa Mesa. It is the opinion of staff that a return to the traditional black and white paint scheme for the police patrol fleet is the most cost effective method to achieve the stated goals and help facilitate COPPS in the community.

KARL SCHULER

Police Lieutenant

JOHN D. HENSLEY

Chief of Police

MARC R. PUCKETT

Director of Finance

ATTACHMENTS: 1 [Police Vehicle Paint Schemes in Orange County](#)

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